

VU Research Portal

The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the Urgency of the Transcendent Experience

Stoker, W.

published in

International Journal for Philosophy of Religion
2008

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1007/s11153-008-9165-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-008-9165-x)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Stoker, W. (2008). The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the Urgency of the Transcendent Experience. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 64, 89-102. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-008-9165-x>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the ‘urgency of the transcendent experience’

Wessel Stoker

Received: 12 November 2007 / Accepted: 12 December 2007 / Published online: 19 February 2008
© The Author(s) 2008

Abstract Since the Romantic period, painters have no longer made use of traditional Christian iconography to express religious transcendence. Taking their cue from Schleiermacher’s *Reden Über die Religion*, painters have sought for new, personal ways to express religious transcendence. One example is Caspar David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea*. Rosenblum argues, in his *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, that there is a parallel between Friedrich and the abstract expressionist Rothko with respect to the expression to religious transcendence. In this article I investigate how the experience of transcendence that Rothko’s paintings want to evoke is to be described. Is it an experience of the sublime in the Romantic tradition? Is it the evocation of the ultimate in accordance with Tillich’s broad concept of religion? Does it display affinity between Rothko and the first generation of abstract painters such as Kandinsky and Malevich? Or is it a transcendent experience that cannot be situated so easily within the options supplied? After determining Rothko’s understanding of transcendence, some issues will be brought up that could be fruitful for Christian theology.

Keywords Concept of God · Theological aesthetics · Rothko · Religious Transcendent · Religious art · Sublime

Introduction

On 27 February 1971, the Rothko chapel in Houston was dedicated as ‘a sacred place open to all, every day’ (Barnes 1989, p. 15).¹ Constituting one whole, fourteen

¹ See [www. Google Rothko Chapel](http://www.GoogleRothkoChapel.com).

paintings by Rothko hang on the eight walls of the chapel. Dominique de Menil, who, together with her husband, requested Rothko to do these paintings for the chapel and financed the whole enterprise, writes:

Rothko created a modulated ensemble of majestic paintings. The dark purplish tones have a soothing effect, yet they retain enough brilliance to stimulate the mind. The black surfaces invite the gaze to go beyond. The chapel is a place conducive to spiritual activity. We are cut off from the world and its suffocating multiplicity, able to wander in the infinite. Lacking the immensity of the desert, it is in the confines of a restricted place that we can embrace ‘the whole’. Here we are nowhere and everywhere; here we can find a blessed wholeness, a sense of unity. (de Menil 1989, 7f.)

Rothko was raised as an orthodox Jew but later distanced himself from Judaism and wanted to depict the eternal symbols of the ‘human drama’ (Rothko 2005f, p. 26) that he saw primarily in the myths of ancient peoples. Thus, in the 1940s, he painted mythical themes in a surrealist style with more or less recognizable (human) forms. Among these paintings were *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (circa 1942), *The Omen of the Eagle* (1942), *Primeval Landscape* (1944). Since 1947, his works became radically abstract and developed into the famous Rothkos with their colourful rectangular, mostly horizontal, forms against a background colour. In his later work, Rothko was also concerned with content or theme. What he and A. Gottlieb wrote in 1943 also applies to his later work: ‘There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that the subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless’ (Gottlieb and Rothko 2005a, p. 36) (Rothko 2004, p. 80). When someone complemented him in an interview on the beauty of the harmony of his colours, he replied that he was not concerned with formal matters like the relation of colour, form or anything else. Rather, his concern was to communicate something about human emotion and that people who were emotionally affected by his paintings have the same religious experience that he had when painting them:

I’m not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else....I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I *communicate* these basic human emotions....The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them, and if you say, you are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point. (In: Rodman 1957, 93f.; cited in Barnes 1989, p. 22.)

Rosenblum argues that there is a relationship between the works of so-called American abstract expressionists like Rothko, Pollock, Newman and Still and painters from the Romantic period, such as Friedrich, Turner, Ward and Martin. He characterizes Rothko’s works as ‘sublime’ and views the abstract sublime of the New York painters from the mid-20th century as having a certain affinity with the Romantic sublime. Rosenblum describes the notion of sublime in the 18th century as a ‘a flexible semantic container for the murky new Romantic experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness, and divinity...’ (Rosenblum 1969, p. 350) (Rosenblum 1975, Chap.8).

The Romantic painters and poets sought for a new way to express the religious transcendent beyond the traditional iconography of altar pieces, Madonnas, and church doctrine. This new expression of transcendence could be found in the painting of sublime landscapes. Rosenblum pointed to a similarity in feeling and vision between Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, Turner's *Evening Star* and Rothko's *Light, Earth and Blue* (1954): 'with a no less numbing phenomenon of light and void, Rothko like Friedrich and Turner, places us on the threshold of those shapeless infinities discussed by the aestheticians of the Sublime' (Rosenblum 1969, p. 353). Friedrich uses figuration, i.e. a monk staring out over an immeasurable sea. Rothko does something different: according to Rosenblum, we ourselves are the monk on the seashore, gazing at Rothko's enormously large paintings as if we were looking at a sunset or the moonlight.

Like the mystic trinity of sky, water, and the earth that, in the Friedrich and Turner, appears to emanate from one unseen source, the floating, horizontal tiers of veiled light in the Rothko seem to conceal a total, remote presence that we can only intuit and never fully grasp. These infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the Sublime; we can only submit to them in an act of faith and let ourselves be absorbed into their radiant depths. (Rosenblum 1969, p. 353)

Except for the panel by the entrance, the paintings in the chapel are not rectangles against a background of colour like Rothko's earlier paintings. There is no reference to an abstract landscape or seascape in the chapel paintings that allows Rosenblum to see some affinity between Rothko's abstract sublime and the Romantic sublime. Nevertheless, this affinity between Rothko's chapel paintings and the Romantic sublime is acknowledged in the literature, but one finds hardly any discussion of the experience of transcendence—which is my concern here (Alloway 1973, pp. 36–42; O'Doherty 1973, pp. 153–187; Nodelman 1997, p. 301). In this article I will explore a possible interpretation of Rothko's chapel paintings and will attempt to answer the question of how they point to an experience of transcendence. Is there any relationship in this respect between the chapel paintings and the Romantic sublime? I will first describe the chapel paintings (Section "Rothko's Chapel Paintings") and will then analyse the experience of transcendence that the chapel paintings evoke and specify what is meant by the abstract sublime. Here I will explore Rothko's transition from his surrealist mythical phase to his abstract works (Section "The abstract sublime"). Finally, I will interpret Rothko's religious representation from the perspective of a theology of culture (Section "An interpretation from the perspective of a theology of culture").

Rothko's Chapel paintings

Rothko chose an octagon with an apse on the north side for the form of the chapel, which Meyer Schapiro later informed him was the form in which early Eastern Orthodox churches were built. Let us enter the chapel and stand with our backs to the south panel that hangs on the wall of the entrance. This narrow vertical canvas deviates from the others in that it is not a monochrome or a triptych. It reminds one most of Rothko's classical work: it is a large vertical black rectangular form that, situated in the

upper part, takes up the largest part of the canvas against a dark purplish background (180×105 in). If we stand with our backs to the south panel, we then look straight ahead at the triptych in the apse on the north side of the chapel. This triptych is a monochrome that is dark purplish and mauve (180×297 in). It is also striking that the triptych hangs deep in the apse and is thus further away from the centre of the chapel than the other paintings.

If we look—still standing at the entrance with our backs to the south panel—first to the right and then to the left, we will see, on the large side walls left and right virtually identical triptychs with large black rectangular forms all framed by a narrow dark purplish edge ($134\frac{7}{8} \times 245\frac{3}{4}$ in). With respect to colour and composition, there is a certain affinity with the panel at the entrance. Unlike the triptych in the apse, here the centre panel is raised. The four short diagonal angle walls are covered with broad monochromes ($177\frac{1}{2} \times 135$ in) of the same colour as the triptych of the wall of the apse, dark purplish mauve.

It is the independence of the paintings from one another that stands out upon a first viewing: we see fourteen canvases on eight walls. Rothko spoke about his paintings as voices in an opera and also drew an analogy with the stage.² The chapel paintings need to be seen not only in themselves but also in their mutual coherence. Together, they form a whole, an interactive system. Because the chapel is octagonal, different symmetries arise. There is symmetry between both black rectangular triptychs of the long east and west side walls and also symmetry between the four monochromes on the four short diagonal angle walls. This produces repetition. The black triptych of the one long side wall returns in the black triptych of the long side wall opposite and vice versa. The repetition of the monochromes on the short side walls is even more intense in that it is repeated four times in a circle. Pop artists like Rauschenberg and Warhol also use repetition. Their work is a criticism of the serial production of consumer goods and the repeated images of mass communication. The theme of ‘repetition’ also plays a role in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, both of whom inspired Rothko to a great extent. I will return to the interpretation of this repetition in the chapel paintings.

The 14 paintings are divided into two groups: seven black rectangular paintings (the two triptychs on the long side walls and the painting on the wall of the entrance) and the seven monochromes (the triptych on the wall of the apse and the four paintings on the short angle walls). As far as colour is concerned, we see the first seven paintings with black rectangles against a dark purplish background and the second seven as dark purplish mauve.

All paintings are done with oil paint (egg /oil emulsion) and have the same two primary coats. The first consists of ‘dry pigments, alizarin crimson and an ultramarine blue, mixed in a hot rabbitskin glue’. The second coat has the same pigments with an addition of ‘bone-black dry pigments’ to make the colour darker, whereas the medium was a synthetic polymer. For the seven black rectangular paintings, these two coats constitute the basis for the black rectangular

² See Rothko (2005f, p. 126). Rothko compares his paintings to a play in which he refers to the composition of the individual painting and views the forms in the painting as actors (Rothko 2005c, p. 58).

forms, whereas the seven monochromes consist only of these two coats. (Barnes 1989, pp. 58–60)

Because the chapel paintings are abstract, we must use indications given by the artist and by the form elements of the paintings to understand what they communicate. Of primary interest here are the size of the canvases and the religious form elements. The paintings are monumental in size. The triptych in the apse is the largest (180 × 297 in) and larger than the triptychs on the side walls (134⁷/₈ × 245³/₄ in). The four monochromes are much broader (135 in) than the single painting on the entrance wall (105 in). The arrangement can evoke an intense understanding of one's own smallness in the 'actual' space in the viewer, who feels like a small speck in an immeasurable cosmic space. The form elements are derived from the Christian tradition. The chapel has the octagonal form of the early Eastern Orthodox churches. Rothko also chose triptychs—paintings consisting of three panels which are often used for altars in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – where the middle panel is central and therefore larger than the side panels. It is striking that the centre panels of the two triptychs on the long side walls are raised so that, together with their side panels, these triptychs suggest crosses. The two colours on the paintings are black and dark purplish mauve. I see the two black triptychs on the long side walls as referring to human existence which Rothko constantly depicts as tragic.³ In this context the colour black represents death and mortality. How are the dark purplish mauve monochromes on the four short angle walls and the monochrome triptych in the apse to be understood? Do they express transcendence, as Alloway and Nodelman maintain (Alloway 1973, pp. 36–42; Nodelman 1997 pp. 306–324)? In iconography, the colour blue represents the sky and transcendence, and dark purplish mauve is clearly not blue. I hold that the monochromes on the short angle walls and the monochrome triptych in the apse do refer to transcendence, but they do so for reasons other than colour. In addition to the monumental size of the paintings and the religious form elements, there is also the painting at the entrance and the relation to the triptych in the apse opposite.

The painting at the entrance is a bit taller (180 in) than the other four single monochromes of the short diagonal angle walls (177¹/₂ in) but much narrower (105 in as opposed to the 135 in of the monochromes). It hangs somewhat isolated on a very large white wall, whereas the other paintings largely cover the walls on which they hang. In addition, the formula is different from the other paintings in the chapel. The panel at the entrance is the only painting that is not a monochrome or a triptych, which also emphasizes its isolated position in the chapel. It has the style of Rothko's classical paintings. It is a large vertical black rectangular form that, situated at the top of the painting, takes up a large part of the canvas against a dark purplish background. Nodelman seeks the interpretation of this not only in its opposition to the other paintings but also in its deviant composition. The format of the painting, vertical with high sides and a narrow base, was the specific format used for iconic representation in the late Middle Ages. Nodelmann therefore interprets the painting at the entrance of the

³ He writes concerning the formula of artwork: 'There must be a clear preoccupation with detail—intimations of mortality.... Tragic art, romantic art, etc. deals with the knowledge of death' and 'The tragic notion of the image is always present in my mind when I paint ...' (Rothko 2005f, pp. 125, 127).

chapel as anthropomorphic, as an expression of the human individual. Rothko did, after all, recognize the importance of this anthropomorphic iconicity for his work (Nodelman 1997, p. 310).⁴ Further, Nodelman refers to the composition of the painting: the internal conflict between the painting as a whole and the contrasting black rectangular form. This corresponds to Rothko's remark that his painting is to be seen as a play in which the forms appear as actors (note 2). Nodelman summarizes his interpretation of the painting as follows:

single in its relationship to what is outside it, yet divided within, the entrance-wall panel is a fitting representation of the human individual as conceptualized in recent Western tradition.... Strongly verticalized yet compact, the painting is by far the most anthropomorphic in its proportions of any of the pictorial units of the ensemble. Its erectness is emphasized by its isolation upon its wall, the most extreme to be found within the installation, reinforcing the drama of internal conflict between the panel as a whole and the ominously suspended and proportionally contrastive black rectangle within it. One could hardly better look for a better evocation of the existential hero, cast into a lonely and alien world.... (Nodelman 1997, 314f.)

Chave's analysis of Rothko's abstract works from the latter part of the 1940s confirms implicitly the interpretation that the vertical black rectangular form on the panel refers to a human figure. She shows that traces of human contours from Rothko's earlier figurative works and from figurative paintings in general continue to be used as fields of colour in his works at the end of the 1940s.⁵

Between the painting at the entrance to the chapel and the one in the apse opposite Rothko wanted to reproduce the tension that he had experienced during a visit to the Byzantine basilica church of St. Marian Assunta in Torcello. Rothko, who does not provide much religious commentary on his chapel paintings, did tell Dominique de Menil about his intense emotional experience during this visit. This was caused primarily by the juxtaposition of a mosaic at the entrance to the church that depicted the Last Judgement and a Madonna with child that hung directly opposite in the apse. He experienced this opposition of entirely different artworks as a tension-filled unity. The ominous feeling that the mosaic of the Last Judgement evoked in him was pushed aside by the sight of the Madonna with child against a gold background opposite (Barnes 1989, p. 67). Visitors to the Rothko chapel can experience a similar tension between the partly black painting at the entrance to the chapel and the dark purplish mauve one in the apse opposite. The triptych covers nearly the whole wall, which leads to the impression that the triptych has a halo. The triptych does indeed express transcendence. If we remain standing at the entrance to the chapel and look right and left we will be confronted with our mortality. The black triptychs on the long side

⁴ Rothko (2005c, p.77) told Seitz that the figures had not disappeared from his later paintings but 'that the symbols for the figures, and in turn the shapes in the later canvases were new *substitutes* for the figures'.

⁵ Chave (1989, 167ff.) thus points to a structural correspondence between figurative paintings and colour forms in Rothko's abstract paintings. She compares, for example, *Number 18*, 1948 and *Number 1*, 1949 with Massy's *Adoration of the Magi* (1526) and *Untitled* 1949 with the group in the painting *Holy Family* by Roger van der Weyden.

walls—the black is also present in the painting at the entrance—are an ‘icon sign’ of a confrontation with tragic human existence. The five monochromes interact with that. The dark purplish mauve monochrome technique in the apse and the monochromes on the four short angle walls are an ‘icon sign’ of a confrontation with the transcendent.

The abstract sublime

Rosenblum saw an affinity between the Romantic sublime in Friedrich and Turner and in Rothko in the veiled light and the formless infinite, radiating infinite emptinesses in his paintings from the 1950s. Is that affinity there as well with Rothko’s paintings in the chapel in Houston where no reference to a sublime landscape is to be found? Rothko’s chapel paintings can be characterized as abstract sublime and I thereby indicate that it both corresponds to and differs from the Romantic sublime (Alloway 1973, pp. 36–42; O’Doherty 1973, pp. 153–187; Nodelman 1997, p. 301). I will first say something about the term ‘abstract’ and then something about the abstract sublime.

In the 1950s, when Rothko was painting in a radically abstract way, he said very surprisingly that abstract art did not interest him and that he painted realistically.⁶ He resisted abstraction that connoted ornamental, abstraction as referring to formal features such as line, colour and space. He deals with a subject, i.e. ‘the human drama’, ‘the temporary and the timeless’. In the 1940s, along with other painters of the New York school, he sought an answer to the moral crisis of the Second World War in myths. He says that his paintings with a mythical theme, such as *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (circa 1942) and *The Omen of the Eagle* (1942) should not be seen as abstract paintings: ‘It is not their intention either to create or to emphasize a formal color-space arrangement. They depart from natural representation only to intensify the expression of the subject implied in the title....’ At the same time he also explained that he painted mythical themes because they say something *universal* about the human consciousness; myths are *eternal symbols of human existence*:

If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity, we have used them again because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of the man’s primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance, be they Greek, Aztec, Iceland, or Egyptian. And modern psychology finds them persisting still in our dreams, our vernacular, and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life. (Gottlieb and Rothko 2005b, p. 39)⁷

Rothko discovered, however, that myth is no longer part of the world of contemporary, modern (1940s) society.⁸ People, he remarked in 1947, were no longer familiar with

⁶ ‘Abstract art never interested me; I always painted realistically. My present paintings are realistic. When I thought symbols were [the best means of conveying meaning] I used them. When I felt figures were, I used them. I am not a formalist’ (Rothko 2005e, p. 77).

⁷ See also Rothko (2005a, p. 40) and Rothko (2004, pp. 91–104).

⁸ Already in the 1930s, he had complained to a friend: ‘The myth is dead.... The old stories having lost appeal, credibility, there are no loved, widely known themes for the painter today (one cause for abstractions)’ (Putnam, ‘Mark Rothko Told Me’, *Arts* [April 1974], 45, cited by Chave 1989, p. 44).

ritual and no longer recognized the urgency for transcendent experience as people did in ancient times: ‘The archaic artist was living in a more practical society than ours, the urgency for transcendent experience was understood, and given official status’.⁹ He regretted that ‘without monsters and gods, art cannot enact our drama’. His own mythical themes did not appear to catch on with the public: ‘The unfriendliness of society to his activity is difficult for the artist to accept. Yet this hostility can act as a lever for the true liberation’. Rothko started to work with a more radical abstraction, in order to be able to communicate his theme better. What played a role here, just as it did with the first generation of abstract artists like Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondriaan, was the insight that abstraction is a breakthrough to a more essential language in which the principles and powers that rule the cosmos can be expressed more adequately (e.g. Tuchman 1986, pp. 17–61; Rothko 2004, pp. 80, 96). In his new abstract style Rothko (2005b, p. 47) wanted to communicate eternal symbols of the human drama as concretely as possible.¹⁰ In short, the use of the radical abstract style since the 1950s has to do with reasons regarding the subject matter of his paintings. He wants to express his subject, ‘the human drama’, as clearly as possible.

The sublime refers in general to a contradictory content: the fascination by something that hurts or frightens or leads to lack of understanding.¹¹ There is something immense that makes one experience one’s own smallness. Described in that way, the sublime can refer both to transcendent religious experiences and to secular experiences. Edmund Burke pointed to a major fire in London as an example of the latter. ‘But suppose such a fatal accident to have happened, what numbers from all parts would crowd to behold the ruins ...?’ (Burke 1990, p. 44). ‘The other’ that breaks the monotony of the everyday does not entail in itself any appeal to something higher or deeper here. Examples of the first are Rudolf Otto’s description of the experience of *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum* in *Das Heilige* and the experience of sublime infinity in Romantic poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth or the Romantic painters mentioned above. Whether the ‘other’ is seen as the religious transcendent or as strictly immanent and secular, the sublime always concerns a breach in that which is given by something ‘else’.

As a contradictory concept of fear and fascination, the sublime can also be applied to the chapel paintings, i.e. as a reference to religious transcendence. The large-scale size of the triptych in the apse and of the broad monochrome on the short angle walls makes the viewer aware of his smallness. At the same time, the black triptychs of the long side walls invoke fear of tragic human existence, which is in tension with the fascination for the dark purplish mauve monochromes as an expression of the transcendent. The transcendent is not invoked as an experience of beauty, as in Christian theology, but as a sublime experience, ‘as the absolutely unknowable void, upon whose brink we finite beings must dizzily hover.’¹² This is different from the Romantic sublime. In Friedrich

⁹ On this and what follows see Rothko (2005c, 57f).

¹⁰ See also Rothko, (Rothko and Gottlieb 2005a, p. 36): ‘We favor the simple expression of the complex thought.’

¹¹ For the history of the concept of the sublime see Shaw (2006).

¹² That is how Milbank (2004, p. 211) characterizes the ‘re-conceptualisation’ of the transcendent as sublime.

and in the Romantics in general, transcendence is given content that is unmistakably influenced or determined by Christianity. One can think here of the landscapes with the ruins of Gothic churches, or the cross or altars, as in Friedrich's *Tetschener Altar* (1808). Rothko does not do that. The paintings were originally intended for a Catholic chapel, but the chapel was later used for interreligious purposes. Rothko did borrow elements from the Christian religion, but this was not because he wanted to use only one specific religious tradition. His use of myths from all different cultures in his earlier work already shows that he was looking for the 'universal' in his search for 'eternal symbols' of the 'human drama'. Therefore, the term sublime should be understood differently from how it was understood by the Romantics insofar as the latter give it Christian connotation. It also differs from a post-modern view of the sublime, as found in Lyotard, insofar as he views it in a secular way. Following Kant, Lyotard views the sublime as a 'kind of hole, a breach in that which is given itself' but differs from Kant in that he sees the sublime as a critical concept. Because of the danger of becoming totalitarian, the 'other' does not have any direct positive meaning. Lyotard understands the sublime as the 'unrepresentable', as that which lies outside of all possible presentation but can be suggested by a presentation in a negative way (Lyotard 1997, p. 78). This critical concept of the sublime is, in my view, not applicable to the chapel paintings because they are unmistakably religious and thus have a certain content (Barnes 1989, p. 44).¹³

There is yet another difference between Rothko's abstract sublime and the Romantic sublime. Because the sublime has become *abstract*, Rothko's work differs from that of the Romantic painters who expressed the sublime in landscapes, seascapes or stormy weather. The sublime is no longer depicted in the chapel paintings as a sublime landscape or as some other figurative representation. The sublime has shifted: it no longer refers to a scene but *the painting itself has become sublime for the viewer*. An implicit indication that this is so is that Rothko placed all the emphasis on what happened between his paintings and the public. According to him, the painting is 'not a picture of an experience; it is an experience' (Seiberling, cited by Chave 1989, p. 172). 'A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token.' (Rothko 'The Ideas of Art' 57). Here religious transcendence is not viewed as the supernatural in opposition to the natural, as a representation of a 'world' above this world. Rather, it is seen as a depth dimension of the world and of the human being herself.

I conclude that there is affinity between the Romantic sublime and the abstract sublime of Rothko's chapel paintings. Both are concerned with the sublime as a contradictory concept of fascination and fear. However, there is a difference in nuance, in that the 'other' that breaks through the ordinary in Rothko is the religious transcendent but is not specified any further in terms of a specific religious tradition, and in that abstraction causes the sublime to shift from the sublime representation to the painting itself as sublime for the viewer. The religious transcendent refers to the depth dimension of the world and the human being.

¹³ For the interpretation of existence in general in Rothko, see Minnema (2003, pp. 203–231).

An interpretation from the perspective of a theology of culture

I will construct my theological interpretation of Rothko's chapel paintings from the perspective of a theology of culture that attempts to find traces of God in the world. There is religious experience in the world outside the church as well, which cannot be derived directly from religious experiences within organized Christian religion—this is one thing Edward Schillebeeckx and Paul Tillich taught me. Generally, religion refers to organized religion, but religion can also be defined more broadly as involvement with the ultimate or transcendence in art, law, science and in manifestations of social justice in society. The advantage of this view is that involvement with transcendence is not connected immediately with a specific organized religion but can be seen as existing in itself. As such, I consider Rothko's chapel paintings as a trace of transcendence that I, as a Christian theologian, want to specify. I will elaborate on this by pointing out the revelatory character of the chapel paintings and will interpret them to a certain extent as the expression of the universal religious in distinction from the institutional religions.

As stated above, according to Rothko, the painting itself is an experience. He uses the language of religion for this, when he speaks of 'religious experience', 'miracle', and 'revelation'. The viewer who is affected by the work of art could have the same religious experience that Rothko himself had when he painted it (Rodman 1957, 93f.; cited in Barnes 1989, p. 22). According to Rothko, the artist needs to have faith in his ability 'to produce miracles' and the painting is a revelation for both the artist and the viewer:

Pictures must be *miraculous*: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a *revelation*, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need. (Rothko 2005c, p. 59; italics mine)

Rothko speaks about the painting here as a revelation in terms similar to those Tillich uses in his theology of art. Tillich sees a parallel between a painting and the 'picture' that the Bible gives of Jesus, distinguishing here between the original revelation to the evangelist on the basis of which he makes the biblical portrait of Jesus as the Christ (original revelation) and the response to this given by someone else (dependent revelation). Tillich also applies this to the artist and his artwork (original revelation) and to the work of art in its relation to the engaged viewer (dependent revelation). Rothko does something similar when he speaks about the relation between the work of art and the viewer. In the quote above, he speaks of 'revelation', which Tillich called 'dependent' revelation (Begbie 1991, 56ff.). Both Rothko and Tillich speak of 'miracle' in connection with the work of art. Rothko even uses the term 'blasphemy' when the painting is viewed in an unworthy way (Fischer, cited by Chave 1989, p. 188).

What do the chapel paintings communicate? I proposed above that the arrangement invokes the tension between the mortal tragic existence of the human being *and* the transcendent. How can this be clarified further? This can be clarified as, in

distinction from organised religion, religion in the broad sense in culture—here in art—as involvement in transcendence.

Although the paintings hang in a ‘dedicated’ place, that does not mean that the chapel paintings represent transcendence as found in the Jewish or Christian tradition. Rothko himself was averse to any confessional approach to the paintings. Contra S. Polcari (Polcari 1991, p. 149), the 14 paintings cannot therefore be viewed as the fourteen stations of the cross. The arrangement argues against that. If we look at how the paintings cohere, we do not see any linear development as is the case with the stations of the cross. There is no beginning and no end. The ‘story’ is missing. Because of their abstract style, the monochromes differ from Romantic painters like Friedrich and Turner in that, as stated, they do not evoke any representation of the infinite in nature. A statement made by Rothko after his ‘mythical phase’ clarifies this. Here as well he speaks of the ‘clarity’ that was also at issue in his move to radical abstract works. In 1949 he wrote:

The progression of a painter’s work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer. As examples of such obstacles, I give (among others) memory, history or geometry, which are swamps of generalization from (which) might pull out parodies of ideas (which are ghosts) but never an idea in itself. To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood. (Rothko 2005d, p. 65)

Here it appears that Rothko is seeking the aspect of *directness* of the religious experience that the painting evokes in the viewer, apart from the religious narrative that the organized religion gives or the esoterism of the first abstract artists such as Mondriaan.¹⁴ Everyone must undergo the ‘revelation’, regardless of his worldview or religious background. He first sought the eternal mythical consciousness of humankind in the old myths. He held in 1943 that what is religiously universal lies in symbols of human existence that are directly recognizable to everyone:

All genuine art forms utilize images that can be readily apprehended by anyone acquainted with the global language of art. That is why we use images that are directly communicable to all who accept art as the language of the spirit. (According to Gottlieb in Gottlieb and Rothko 2005a, p. 39)

He now attempts to achieve this in chapel paintings without ‘remembering’ the old myths. With the chapel paintings he wants to invoke a direct revelation in the viewer. I do not see it as an inconsistency that he has used form elements from the Christian tradition here, such as the octagonal form of the chapel, the triptychs and late medieval tradition in the vertical narrow panel at the entrance of the chapel. As he sought the universal of the myth in the Greek myths primarily, so now he uses the above-mentioned Christian form elements to express what is religiously universal. My evaluation of this is different from Rosenblum’s; Rosenblum does not emphasize enough the difference between the Romantic sublime and the abstract sublime. In a society strongly

¹⁴ It seems also incorrect to view the arrangement, as Nodelman does (313f.), in terms of the Western metaphysics of the one and the many.

influenced by Christianity, the Romantic poets and painters sought for an alternative to traditional Christian iconography. Rosenblum and Abrams (1973) see this as a form of secularization, as found in the well-known secularization thesis of Berger and others that religion in the West would virtually disappear. Rothko, who is Jewish, does not seek an alternative to traditional Christian iconography but makes liberal use of it. He uses religious traditions in general to give form to the universal human drama.

Rothko stands at a turning point: his abstract sublime is related to the Romantic sublime, but the society in which he wants to communicate his subject is changing radically and, like the period after the making of the Rothko chapel, has become religiously pluralist. The intention of the chapel fits in well with that as a place for interreligious dialogue as a communal action for peace. I consider the arrangement in the chapel an important contribution to that in the language of images. Before interreligious dialogue begins in the chapel, the arrangement itself evokes something universally human: the confrontation of the finite human being with the transcendent. The abstract sublime leaves the content of the transcendent open and it is up to the viewer to fill that in. G. Fraser understands this as entailing that there is a core of religious experience that is the same for everyone and to which the religions add something with their doctrine and rituals. He sees an opposition between the ‘modern spirituality’ of modern art and Rothko in particular on the one hand and the institutional religions on the other (Fraser 2005, pp. 155–157). This understanding is to be rejected because of what has been argued above. The chapel paintings can be better interpreted by referring to Tillich’s mystical *a priori* and Schleiermacher’s immediate awareness of God. There is nothing in the views of Tillich and Schleiermacher that suggests a common core to which different religions add something. The core appears only in a concrete religion and is therefore always different (Stoker 2000, pp. 60, 63).

The reference to Tillich’s mystical *a priori* and Schleiermacher’s immediate consciousness of God allows some affinity on this point as well with the Romantic sublime of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Coleridge and Wordsworth, who are always concerned with the immediate relationship with the absolute. But, for Rothko, the sublime has no Christian connotation. The chapel paintings thus evoke the immediate presence of the ultimate in the human being. As such, it is without form but can receive form in an organised religion or a spiritual movement. I have rejected such a religious *a priori* elsewhere (Stoker 2006). Without accepting such a religious *a priori*, I would begin with the experience of the transcendent itself that the arrangement is intended to evoke. That is always an experience within a tradition. Rothko’s notion that the viewer can simply leave his ‘memory’ and ‘history’ behind when confronted with the chapel paintings is too easy. Because the transcendent is still open, the viewer will experience the chapel paintings in light of his own tradition. People will interpret the arrangement variously in line with their religious tradition. I do that here on the basis of my own tradition. I will thus skip the question of what the relationship is between the abstract sublime and the beautiful that is connected with God in the Christian traditions (Stoker 2008) and will limit myself to an interpretation of the repetition of the two virtually identical black triptychs and of the repetition of the four monochromes of the short angle walls.

A reference to repetition in pop art seems less obvious than a reference to repetition in Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. After all, the chapel arrangement does not have to do

so much with a critique of the consumer society as it does with existential questions. Nodelmann explains this by referring both to Nietzsche's eternal return as well as to Kierkegaard's concept of repetition. According to him, both have to do with the moment of the present experience as an abyss of possibility that one accepts courageously or creatively or rejects because one does not dare make the choice to live authentically (Nodelman 1997, p. 336). The reference to Nietzsche's teaching of eternal return seems less obvious, because the latter is a world without transcendence, without beginning, end or purpose. In such a world, according to Zarathustra, the 'aesthetic' or 'existential imperative' for everything that one wants to do is: 'ist es so, dass ich es unzählige Male thun will?' The monochromes of the short angle walls and the monochrome triptych in the apse refer to transcendence.

A reference to Kierkegaard's view of repetition thus seems more obvious.¹⁵ Kierkegaard's *Repetition* (1843) is not about repetition in nature, the return of the seasons, but about the reflexive repetition of the human being who lives in the present in relation to his past and future. Repetition can be understood in a Platonic sense as remembrance of the world of ideas where the human being comes from; one then arrives at one's destiny by remembering as a 'backwards repetition'. On the other hand, in his book *Repetition* Constans Constantius points to repetition as a 'forward remembering'. The future has priority here. The life of the human being is a repetition by virtue of realizing the anticipation. But how is that possible? To do that, one must be able to survey the whole of one's life. Who can 'sail around his life?' (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 186). Constans Constantius believes that we must therefore be referred to a transcendent power that can also liberate us from guilt. Constantius' thesis is that true repetition is eternity (Christian eternity viewed as future life). Over against this eschatologically described horizon, repetition can occur in everyday life as a prolepsis of the future life, liberation for starting anew.

The repetition in the chapel arrangement alludes to a human choice of existence that begins in the daily life of the human being but is completed only in eternity. The repeating black triptych points to the necessity of the human being appropriating his past from the future, having the past present as possibility, a repetition that is completed only in eternity, which comes to expression in the repeating four monochromes of the angle walls.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

References

- Abrams, M. H. (1973). *Natural supernaturalism: Tradition and revolution in romantic literature*. New York: Norton.
- Alloway, L. (1973). Residual sign systems in abstract expressionism. *Artforum*, 12, 36–42.
- Barnes, S. J. (1989). *The Rothko Chapel: An act of faith*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Begbie, J. (1991). *Voicing creations's praise: Towards a theology of the arts*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

¹⁵ Here I am using Theunissen and Hühn (2004).

- Burke, E. (1990). *A philosophical enquire into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful*. Ed. A. Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chave, A. C. (1989). *Mark Rothko: Subjects in abstraction*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- de Menil, D. (1989). Preface. In S. J. Barnes (Ed.), *The Rothko Chapel: An act of faith*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Fraser, G. (2005). Modernism and the minimal god: On the empty spirituality of the god of the philosophers. In H. A. Harris, & C. J. Insole (Eds.), *Faith and the philosophical analysis: The impact of analytical philosophy on the philosophy of religion* (pp. 148–157). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gottlieb, A., & Rothko, M. (2005a). Rothko's and Gottlieb's letter to the editor, 1943. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), M. Rothko, *Writings on art* (pp. 35–36). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Gottlieb, A., & Rothko, M. (2005b). The portrait and the modern artist' by Rothko and Gottlieb, 1943. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), *Writings on art* (pp. 37–40). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1983). *Repetition: fear and trembling, stages on life's way*. In H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong (Eds.), *Kierkegaard's Writings VI*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1997). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Milbank, J. (2004). Sublimity: The modern transcendent. In R. Schwartz (Ed.), *Transcendence: Philosophy, literature, and theology approach the beyond* (pp. 211–234). New York and London: Routledge.
- Minnema, L. (2003). Bildlose Bildhaftigkeit: "Mythisierung" im Werk Mark Rothkos. In G. Oberhammer (Ed.), *Mythisierung der Transzendenz als Entwurf ihrer Erfahrung* (pp. 203–231). Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Nodelman, S. (1997). *The Rothko Chapel paintings: Origins, structure, meaning*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- O'Doherty, B. (1973). *American masters : The voice and the myth*. New York: Random House.
- Polcari, S. (1991). *Abstract expressionism and the modern experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rodman, S. (1957). *Conversations with artists*. New York: Devin-Adair.
- Rosenblum, R. (1969) The sublime. In H. Geldzahler (Ed.), *New York painting and sculpture: 1940–1970* (pp. 350–359). New York: E.D.Dutton & Co.
- Rosenblum, R. (1975) *Modern painting and the Northern romantic tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Rothko, M. (2004). *The artist's reality: Philosophies of art*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rothko, M. (2005a). Comments on *The Omen of the Eagle*, 1943. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), *Writings on art* (p. 40). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rothko, M. (2005b). Letter to Barnett Newman, July 31, 1945. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), *Writings on art* (p. 47). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rothko, M. (2005c). The Romantics were prompted, 1947. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), *Writings on art* (pp. 58–59). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rothko, M. (2005d). Statement on his attitude in painting, 1949. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), *Writings on art* (p. 65). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rothko, M. (2005e). Notes from an interview by W. Seitz, 1952. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), *Writings on art* (pp. 75–79). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Rothko, M. (2005f). Address to pratt institute, 1958. In M. López-Remiro (Ed.), *Writings on art* (pp. 125–128). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Shaw, P. (2006). *The sublime*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stoker, W. (2000). Are human beings religious by nature? Schleiermacher's generic view of religion and the contemporary pluralistic secular culture. *Bijdragen, International Journal in Philosophy and Theology*, 61, pp. 51–75.
- Stoker, W. (2006). *Is faith rational? A hermeneutical-phenomenological accounting for faith*. Louvain: Peeters.
- Stoker, W. (2008) Beauty as a theological concept: A critical examination of the aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Gerardus van der Leeuw. In H. Zock (Ed.), *Art and religion*, Leuven: Peeters (forthcoming).
- Theunissen, M., & Hühn, H. (2004). Wiederholung. In J. Ritter (Ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Vol. 12, pp. 738–746). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Tuchman, M. (1986). Hidden meanings in abstract art. In M. Tuchman (Ed.), *The spiritual in art: Abstract painting 1890–1985* (pp. 17–61). New York: Abbeville Press.